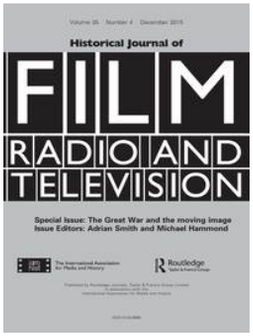

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Fantômas sous les tropiques. Aller au cinéma en Afrique coloniale

Leen Engelen

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BOOK REVIEWS

Fantômas sous les tropiques. Aller au cinéma en Afrique coloniale
Odile Georg
Paris, Vendémiaire
285 pp., EUR 45.72 (cloth), EUR 22.00 (paper)

Hitherto the field of New Film History – and especially research on the history of cinema culture and film exhibition – focused largely on Western Europe and the United States. Its focus on colonial Africa, makes *Fantômas sous les tropiques. Aller au cinéma en Afrique coloniale* (Fantômas in the tropics. Cinemagoing in colonial Africa) a valuable addition to the existing body of research. The author, Odile Georg, a specialist of colonial and contemporary Africa, situates her research in the New Film History tradition, but at the same time locates the different instances of cinemagoing firmly in the social, cultural and political historiography of colonial Africa. The concept of cinemagoing is clearly framed as a social and cultural practice and its study involves studying films (in casu mostly western products); film exhibition and programming; audiences (socio-economic status, behaviour, reception) and exhibition venues (location, architecture as reflection of racial segregation). Sociological, historical and anthropological approaches come together when asking such questions as why colonial audiences were attracted to cinema and how cinemagoing became a popular pastime for so many different social groups in colonial Africa. With its numerous detailed cases from different countries and time frames, the book offers a mosaic of different experiences of cinemagoing, analysed through the prisms of film censorship, urbanism, racial segregation, colonial power, cinephilia, emancipation, entrepreneurship and entertainment. From all these different jigsaw pieces emerges a surprisingly coherent argument and thorough understanding of cinema culture in colonial Africa.

Geographically, the book concentrates on West Africa; the time frame is roughly 1920–1962. Nevertheless, numerous examples and phenomena from French Equatorial Africa, British Africa and the Belgian Congo, and examples dating from the early years of cinema (pre-First World War) or the immediate post-colonial era are cited. Because of this wide scope, the book necessarily leans on existing in-depth research on the different geographical areas (for example, Charles Ambler and James Burns on colonial Zimbabwe/Rhodesia, Vivian Bickford-Smith on South Africa and Francis Ramirez and Christian Rolot on the Belgian Congo, Burundi and Ruanda etc.). In the existing literature however, many areas in colonial Africa are still under-researched. Georg made a substantial addition to the

existing body of knowledge. The numerous examples and cases from the different local cinema cultures are based on first-hand archival research and bring the larger argument of the book to life. Moreover, they testify to the surprising variety of cinema cultures and movie-going habits in colonial Africa. For some countries, and especially for the early years of African cinemagoing the official sources (archival documents like public records and newspaper clippings) are scarce. This lack is compensated by author's use of other sources, like self-conducted interviews, picture postcards, photographs, diaries and literary accounts, all of which are cited in the elaborate source section.

The book shows that researching cinema in colonial Africa also means thinking out of the box of traditional film historical knowledge. Commercial film exhibition took off only in the 1920s. Besides regular movie theatres there are however several other screening spaces of importance: missionary outposts, schools (often headed by missionaries or official administrators), supervised workers villages connected to mines or plantations. More often than not these spaces are controlled by colonial or religious administrators. A lot of the screenings take place outdoors, in courtyards or squares. Georg demonstrates that it is precisely in the process of turning these venues into *ad hoc* movie theatres, that the pervasiveness of colonial culture and power relations becomes clear: from the organisation of completely separate venues in different parts of town for westerners and Africans to mixed theatres with or without segregated seating/standing areas.

The book is definitely a great source for those studying colonial culture and history. For media historians interested in cinema culture it exemplifies the benefits of the combination of a macro and a micro perspective. Constantly switching between the historical detail of particular instances of cinema culture (in a specific town, venue, time) and the global perspective on cinema culture in colonial Africa, *Fantômas sous les tropiques* shows that casting a wide net and taking a bird's eye view can not only uncover unexpected similarities and differences between countries, but can also incite different readings of particular experiences. The book is a great contribution to current knowledge about entertainment culture in colonial Africa and a fine example of how to research historical cinema cultures outside of Western Europe and the United States.

Leen Engelen
LUCA School of Arts, Leuven University

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The Grierson effect: tracing documentary's international movement
Zoë Druick and Deane Williams (Eds)
London, British Film Institute, 2014
vii + 260 pp., illus, £24.99 (paper)

To many of his contemporaries as well as many scholars, John Grierson (1898–1972) represents the father of the documentary film movement in Great